



**ACADEMIC SUCCESS CHALLENGES FACED BY
INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS:
Final Report**

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Academic Success Challenges Faced by International Graduate Students

Introduction

This is the report and recommendations resulting from a research project exploring the academic success challenges faced by non-English speaking international graduate students as they pursue their graduate studies at York. It includes research findings and offers recommendations for changes for a more proactive approach to removing the academic challenges for York international students which have been identified. This report includes examples of best that may serve as models for improvements in this arena.

Recognizing and analyzing the problems these students face as learners in unfamiliar contexts is a critical first step towards improving the learning environments and student experience for international students. It is timely to consider the impact of students' earlier educational and cultural experiences as they continue their studies in our institution. Recent York strategic documents stress globalization and internationalization as key external and internal factors shaping York's future. York aims to enhance the quality and sustainability of graduate education and improve the student experience. At the same time, federal and provincial government policy calls for a significant increase in graduate student enrolment at Ontario universities over the next few years.

If we become more knowledgeable about the academic adjustment issues these students face, we can implement appropriate support services. Research on identifying issues and barriers to academic success will help in designing and implementing services and programs critical to helping international graduate students have positive experiences, fulfill their educational goals, and act as ambassadors for York as they return to their home countries.

Research plan: The project started with a literature review which uncovered a rich field of research on international student academic adjustment including academic integrity aspects of international education. Several findings from the review included strategies for eliminating some academic barriers for international students and highlighted best practices of universities and organizations in dealing with related issues. These articles, books and reports covered background information and a variety of research approaches used in this field. A bibliography is included at the end of the report.

The research plan was to

- Uncover issues that international graduate students identify as barriers to their classroom and research experiences at York
- Uncover issues that faculty who teach international graduate students see as barriers to their success in their classroom and research experiences
- Explore with University administrators, service providers, librarians, researchers and others their views on possible barriers, suggestions for improvement, and recommendations for change
- Verify that academic integrity and plagiarism issues are seen as challenges for international graduate students coming from various educational and cultural backgrounds.

A three-pronged approach was used to carry out the research. To help uncover the academic issues international graduate students face at York, I conducted qualitative interviews with international students from various countries and graduate programs to hear from them what they see as the challenges they face. The interviewees spoke about their educational backgrounds, learning styles, cultural roots, language proficiency, speaking and writing skills, faculty interactions, and other topics they identified as pertinent, including academic integrity and plagiarism concerns.

I also spoke with faculty members from a variety of disciplines and programs to explore from the instructors' point of view areas of difficulty or success for international graduate students, effective teaching strategies, and resulting programming to assist with the students' transition to a Canadian graduate program.

The third group with whom I met were administrators and librarians working with international students to uncover what barriers are perceived to exist, what is presently in place to remove these barriers, and what initiatives can be put in place to improve our performance in supporting intercultural academic success for the international students at York.

Methodology: Student interviews

York International offered to identify a cohort of students based on selected criteria. A suitable group of international graduate students were identified. Excluding graduate students from the Schulich School of Business and Osgoode Hall Law School, the criteria included students in at least their second year of graduate study at York from China, India, Pakistan, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey and Nigeria. York International sent them an email on my behalf describing the nature and purpose of the research and asked students to contact me if they are interested in being interviewed. I then selected seven of those to be interviewed, five men and two women, who best fit the spread of countries and programs from different countries (two from Bangladesh, one from China, one from India, two from Mexico, and one from Turkey) and from different graduate programs including the sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

I was pleased with the spread of countries because they echoed content found in the recent report by the Advisory Panel on Canada's International Education Strategy entitled *International Education: a Key Driver of Canada's Future Prosperity*. In that document it states

We recommend that resources for promotion activities should be focused on the markets currently assessed to have the greatest growth potential for Canada: China, India, Brazil, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region including Turkey, Vietnam and Mexico.

These markets should receive priority resource allocation." (Advisory Panel, 2012, p. xvi)

The student interviews were in-depth semi-structured recorded interviews of approximately one-hour to learn about the students' previous educational experiences, their experiences at York, their attitudes about academic writing, and their views on their current assignments. In addition some information about academic integrity experiences prior to coming to York and while here

were incorporated into the interview session. I took notes at these meetings as well as had the audio files transcribed so I had a verbatim record of the interviews. To ensure student anonymity throughout this report, the student interviewees are identified only by their country of origin and level of graduate program. The student questionnaire used in the interviews is at the end of this report.

Faculty, librarians, and administrators: Working with the assistance of the Faculty of Graduate Studies, names suggested by my own research, and tips suggested by other interviewees, I met with twenty-two York faculty members, librarians, service providers and administrators who instruct or work with international students. We explored any academic barriers they thought were faced by international graduate students, including academic integrity and plagiarism challenges. I took notes at these meetings.

The outcome of the research may result in some additional support to assist students in overcoming barriers to academic success. For this thrust to internationalization to be a success and for York to be a leader in providing an enhanced experience for these students, the academic barriers that students face need to be identified to ensure academic integration and achievement. Understanding the issues involved has implications for policies and services that can eventually be put in place to provide the necessary support for beneficial student experiences and outcomes ensuring that the full benefits of internationalization are realized.

Findings

Several dominant themes emerged from the literature review and interview process: Internationalization Goals, Academic Cultural Differences and Academic Adjustment, Role of Faculty, and Academic Integrity and Plagiarism. A common thread that ran through many of these topics was the need to think of international students not as one homogeneous group but as smaller groups or even individuals deserving attention for the challenges that they face.

Internationalization Goals

The Council of Ontario Universities' (COU) 2012 *Position Paper on Graduate Education in Ontario* states that "Ontario universities welcome the major investments that the Province of Ontario has made to expand graduate education under its Reaching Higher plan; as well as its commitment to a further increase of 6,000 new graduate student spaces by 2016, under the new Putting Students First plan for postsecondary education." (COU, 2012, p.8.)

Internationalization is a complex process and has multiple components. The Advisory Panel report on international education mentioned above acknowledges that the scope and nature of support services provided to international students varies across campuses and within institutions. The hope is that each university shares the belief in the intrinsic value of providing each international student with a quality educational experience and that appropriate financial and human resources are available to offer the necessary support to these students. (Advisory Panel, 2012)

The picture that emerges at York indicates that there is a decentralized approach with participants including York International, the Faculty of Graduate Studies, individual departments within Faculties, and several service units. There are varying strategies and efforts in place. For the acclimatization of international graduate students, these various groups could have a more centralized cooperative plan in guiding internationalization initiatives for graduate students.

More attention needs to be focused on assessing York's initiatives relating to international students in light of the most recent *University Academic Plan 2010-2015: Enhancing Quality in a Globalized World*. The UAP acknowledges the large number of students who come to York from abroad and that York's aspirations will be more fully realized on a global stage, as evidenced by the subtitle of the Plan. The Plan states:

For York over the next five years, a key imperative is a redoubling of efforts to internationalize the university. This will be accomplished by increasing the presence of graduate and undergraduate international students and faculty members on the University's campuses, and by increasing the opportunities for members of the community to gain global experience. (York University, UAP, 2010, p.7)

The University commits to "fostering internationalization as expressed in the student population, the curriculum and exchange programs and developing a more strategic approach to

internationalization and enhancing the recruitment of and support for international students.” (York University, UAP, 2010, p.10)

These goals match Canada’s international education strategy.

Our specific goal is to double the number of quality international students within 10 years, from 239,000 today, with a focus on attracting top talent who will either decide to make Canada their home or return to their home countries as leaders of the future. We believe that this goal allows us to focus on sustaining the quality of our education systems while at the same time attracting those students who meet our high standards. (Advisory Panel, 2012, p. ix)

The report goes on to say that “Attracting a greater number of international doctoral candidates would likely improve Canada’s performance in producing greater research talent.” (Advisory Panel, 2012, p.7) Throughout the Advisory Panel Report, there is an emphasis on the fact that increased growth in the number of international students should not be achieved at the expense of a quality educational experience for all students.

Many of the faculty members and administrators to whom I spoke highlighted the lack of sufficient financial support for international graduate students given the provincial and University strategic goals to increase enrollments for this group. There seems to be a disconnect between government and University’s goals and their practice due to lack of sufficient funding. Presently there are limits on the number of international students allocated to certain graduate programs at York, in some cases permitting entry to only one or two when more highly qualified students apply to the programs. Some interviewees pointed to institutional disincentives to increasing the numbers of international students allowed to enter York’s graduate programs. One interviewee asked the question “What price is government/university prepared to pay to meet enrollment goals? “

The COU position paper on graduate education goes on to say that

Ontario lags behind Canada in attracting international students, particularly to graduate programs. In Ontario, only 15 per cent of graduate students are international students, in comparison to an average of 20 per cent for the entire country. Four provinces – Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia – fund international graduate students at the same rate as domestic students. Two provinces – British Columbia and Quebec – provide partial funding for international graduate students. (COU, 2012, p.8)

The purpose of that position paper is to open a dialogue with the government to establish specific measures to attract the additional 6000 graduate students stated as a goal and recommends including funding for a limited number of international graduate students as part of that number or in addition to them. (COU, 2012)

At York there are initiatives in place to set-up exchange agreements with comprehensive funding coming from the students’ home countries such as Saudi Arabia, China, or Iraq that covers tuition, living expenses etc. These types of arrangements for sufficient international

graduate student funding may help solve the funding shortages but create other concerns such as the maintaining of academic standards for admission and degree completion.

Academic Cultural Differences and Cultural Adjustment

York University administrators from a variety of units work hard to make the campus a welcoming place for international students. There are several administrative offices and service units actively working in support of international students. The dedication of the staff in trying to ensure that each student is given a good chance to succeed was evident to me during interviews with some of these key individuals. These administrators act on personal convictions to help students adjust, working with them in groups and as individuals with the belief that it is important for all students to be successful.

It is repeated in the literature that there is a tendency to view international students as a homogeneous group. However the term “international students” really covers a population with a great deal of heterogeneity. When discussing the concerns of international students, we want to consider the needs of particular groups of students, rather than seeing them as an undifferentiated block. While it is important not to make assumptions that all students from a particular country or region of the world face academic challenges in the same way, it is just as important not to overlook cultural issues stemming from their countries of origin.

Maxine G. Wintre, Saeid Chavoshi, and Lorna Wright have recently distributed a research report about York’s undergraduate international students entitled *International Students: an Interim Report*. Noting regional difference among the international student population, the report states that “Our data suggest that international students from different regions do not adjust equally well.... Talking to these students would help pinpoint the difficulties they might be facing in their adjustment.” (Wintre, Chavoshi, and Wright, 2012, p.30)

A common conclusion in the research literature is that the academic culture is an extension of national culture. Therefore the academic culture of a new country requires an adjustment on the part of visiting students. This includes the loss of original culture norms and their replacement by those of the host country as a necessity for students if academic success is to be achieved. (Brown, 2007)

In speaking with two faculty members in separate interviews about their experiences in teaching and assisting international students at York, an interesting distinction was made regarding international students coming for abroad and those first generation domestic students whose parents’ educational experiences took place outside of Canada. Professor Paul Grayson’s research on the academic achievement of first generation domestic students and international students includes the finding that “The clear implication of this research is that students with parents who are knowledgeable of the educational system and understand how and when to intervene on their children’s behalf would acquire more cultural resources than others to deal with their own educational issues.” (Grayson, 2011, p. 609)

The report by the Advisory Panel on Canada’s International Education Strategy highlights this difference between what it terms international students vs. foreign students.

When evaluating capacity for international enrolment, it is necessary to note the important distinction between “international students” and “foreign students”. As defined by the OECD in Education at a Glance 2011:

- Students are classified as “international” if they left their country of origin and moved to another country to study
- New permanent residents are sometimes classified as “foreign students” as they are not citizens of the country in which they are studying (for example, young people from immigrant families).

Canada’s capacity study identifies the combined population of international students and landed immigrant/permanent resident student (i.e. the “foreign student” population) in Canada as an emerging policy issue, considering the potential for issues affecting this broader group of students including academic preparation, language skills and undifferentiated public perceptions regarding the impact of these students on local communities. The study further adds that these issues are particularly salient in major metropolitan areas with large immigrant populations. (Advisory Panel, 2012, p.34)

In their interim report on York’s international undergraduate students, Professor Wintre and her colleagues found that “The international student experience seems to have changed greatly over perceptions of it in the last 4 decades – and it appears that we at York need to adjust our understanding of these new findings in our recruitment methods and programmes to support the international students.” (Wintre, Chavoshi and Wright, 2012, p.3)

In interviewing a PhD student from Turkey, a valuable point was made about the international student’s knowledge concerning culture and politics in Canada and the challenge posed for those from other backgrounds:

I don’t know what would be the best way to address this, but I think it’s a barrier for us to communicate with other people with, you know, like basically who are from Canada....Am I the only one who’s coming from, you know, like some other country?...I think in some classes I felt that like the readings were mostly focused on the Canadian context or North American context in general, and they don’t quite address issues rising from the global south, basically. I think, you know, like there’s a couple of courses basically that can be brought in to make... a global perspective. I think, you know, like York in general has this kind of perspective, but it’s not always materialized in, you know, like teaching or research context. So in research too it’s like there are some big research projects going on, but there are not many components from other countries. This could be addressed as well.

A project that has been immensely influential in my initial and ongoing interest in the academic challenges faced by international graduate students is the *Writing Across Borders* film project at The Writing Centre at Oregon State University. The project website at <http://cwl.oregonstate.edu/writing-across-borders> explains its goals this way:

Writing Across Borders is a 3-year documentary project written and directed by Wayne Robertson funded by Oregon State University’s Center for Writing and Learning and its Writing Intensive Curriculum Program. The documentary’s purpose is to help faculty, writing assistants, and other professionals work more productively with international students in writing environments. The film’s goal is to address some of the most

significant challenges international students face when writing for American colleges and universities.

In addressing these challenges, it asks the following questions:

How does culture play out in writing, and how are our expectations shaped by cultural preferences?

How do we assess international student writing when we have to grade it alongside the writing of native speakers, and how can we think about surface error in a fair and constructive manner?

What kinds of teaching and testing practices disadvantage international students and which help them improve as writers?

Several students, both graduate and undergraduate, are seen in the film describing different aspects of the challenges they face in writing. In addition to quotes from the students that I have interviewed for my project, I have also included relevant parts of the Oregon State students' comments in this report. The film clips of the students speaking can be seen at <http://cwl.oregonstate.edu/view-clips-film>. The complete video is available at <http://cwl.oregonstate.edu/download-transcript-film>.

A valuable summary of the issues faced by international students as they adjust to the academic cultures on our North American campuses can be found in the Robertson article on international students, their learning environments and perceptions. Research reported in this article characterizes views of some difficulties faced by students in a new academic culture which were also touched upon in comments made by some of the international students I interviewed:

- Less worldly and less knowledgeable about past and present world events, past and present social and political issues
- Reluctant to give a personal opinion or to involve themselves in tutorial/class discussions, due to cultural difference
- Female students often reluctant to argue with an older person, especially if in a position of authority
- Different attitude to learning and go about learning differently.
- Tend to take the word of the book or lecturer as the truth and don't question it
- Regurgitate text from books etc. seen as normal learning
- Come from cultures that have different discourse patterns. Need to learn the discourse conventions – both written and spoken. (Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas, 2000, pp.97-8)

It was not a surprise to learn from the literature review I conducted that international students experience stress caused at the start of their stay by the differences between the academic conventions of their home country and those of the new academic environment. Although it may be true that all students are challenged by the demands of post-secondary education, international students particularly are placed under pressure by confrontation with a different academic culture since students come with expectations shaped by their previous learning

experiences. Academic difficulties may arise not just because of linguistic differences but also academic cultural differences. (Brown, 2007)

A PhD student from Mexico responded this way when asked to think back to the initial classes at York:

I guess the classes themselves were similar to the ones I had in Mexico except for the language...I used to think a lot about the language because I was worried of not understanding everything and I actually didn't understand everything in the first few lectures. It took some time to be able to get more and more....

One PhD student from Bangladesh I interviewed commented that:

Initially the first day I thought like, Oh, this is going to be an easy program because, you know (pause) and it was probably because I had done it before; but then as things progressed, I realized that, you know, the rigor was a bit different, of course, you know. The teaching method was different. That was the impression only from the first class though, I mean; and from other classes, you know, the impression was different... it's not as interactive, you know, as I thought it would be.

A Masters student from Mexico related:

Well, the first the kind of class - I don't know because a master level, but the kind of class where it's more like a seminar instead of the teacher just talking and talking but where you are actually expected to participate every time and... well, not every time, but to be more active into the conversation. That's the only a different approach from what we have in Mexico.

The research done at Oregon State for the *Writing Across Borders* (WAB) project, as the title indicates, focuses on cultural preferences in academic writing. The researchers point out that "It is easy to assume that North American preferences in writing are natural or the most logical way to do things. In fact preferences are shaped by culture, political values, educational practices and rhetorical traditions." (WAB, Film Transcription) This was made clear to me during the 2011 International Student Orientation session sponsored by York International. There was a brief discussion of academic issues and one fourth-year undergraduate student from Mexico presented a clear and graphic example of the difference in writing organizational preference between his country and Canada. He described his native format as a spiral, presenting interesting details and commentary from the more general narrowing to the final point to be made whereas the Canadian way, as he has experienced it at York, was represented by a straight line with the thesis, supporting arguments, and conclusion presented in a point-to-point linear way.

Here are some of the quotes from the *Writing Across Borders* film that are illuminating when we think of the issues international students face in academic writing coming from different academic cultures with differing organizational preferences:

Ecuador – What I notice is that Americans will usually introduce their main point or say exactly what they want to say right at the beginning. It's almost like organizing in their introduction their main point and then they develop their main point. Well in Ecuador what we would like to do or what we sometimes tend to do is that we don't present the main point at the beginning. We go around it and around it until we finally get to the point which is in the middle. It's kind of like this idea of circularity. We go around it and around it until we get to it.

Viet Nam – In Viet Nam, you risk the chance of being penalized if you go outside the classroom and put in extra information other than what is lectured in the class from the teachers. ... In the United States, for example in my history of medicine class, I didn't do very well as I thought I would on my paper, my first paper, because I didn't go outside the classroom and find extra information to put down in my paper. So the main difference here is that extra information and the students' own opinions are so valuable in essays. (WAB, Film Transcription)

Another area highlighted by the *Writing Across Borders* interviewees is preferences for style and word choice. These can have a noticeable impact on academic writing. For international students, the kind of voice, style and tone that instructors expect is often different than what they have been taught in their home countries.

Turkey- In America I have noticed that the writing professors want short, concrete, understandable sentences. That's the way to write your composition. But in Turkish, what we do is we use long and elaborate sentences because we think that it's more poetic and it flows better that way, and you read it for the sake of getting some kind of pleasure out of it, not necessarily just to understand the point.

Jordan – Actually exaggeration is acceptable in the Arabic way. On the contrary it is sometimes acceptable or preferred to use exaggeration. It helps the writer to write. It helps him to express his feelings and describe whatever he wants to describe and to attract the reader to his writing. And the reader would think the writer is a good writer. (WAB, Film Transcription)

As an example of the issues raised in classrooms and in graduate student writing tasks, these differences in academic cultures are difficult to determine. It is complex and challenging to decide how much to adapt teaching style to accommodate cultural differences. It is clear, however, that instructors cannot take for granted that students from other countries will have the same expectations and preferences for writing as they do. (WAB, Film Transcription)

I interviewed some instructors from York University English Language Institute (YUELI) who have experience with these kinds of issues. In the courses they mount for their students, instructors address cultural differences by talking clearly to those who do not have strong English language skills, tone down the use of idioms, make sure the language they use is more direct and less implicit, slow down the pace of their discourse, provide hints for successful presentations, check on student comprehension from time to time, provide clear course outlines, and stress clear expectations which they reinforce throughout the course.

Role of Faculty

Of course an important group essential to international student adjustment are the faculty members who interact with these students. Consistent with the research done in this area, some faculty are aware of international student academic needs, while others may need to make pedagogical adjustments and ensure that their interpretations of student behaviour are in fact correct. (Andrade, 2006)

Thinking about faculty interactions with international graduate students in particular, the supervisory aspect of the relationship is often highlighted. One of the first problems seen by the supervisor is the gap between the student's linguistic ability and the level of linguistic competence needed to write a dissertation or thesis. Language is a core problem for those studying in a country other than their own and can pose difficulties for students in acquiring linguistic competence in written work. (Brown, 2007)

A York professor noted during my interview that the language proficiency of some of the graduate students in the program was so poor that it was recommended to them to attend language classes sponsored by the Toronto District School Board to improve their English language skills. On one occasion, lack of ability to read English was considered a safety hazard in a laboratory setting because the graduate student was unable to fully comprehend equipment instructions.

My interviews with the students indicated that issues arise also in tutorials in which they had difficulty in articulating their ideas in discussions and presentations. When asked to look at different aspects of what was required in a course and to describe any barriers that the student experienced in reading, listening, speaking or giving presentations, a PhD student from Mexico responded:

Well, everything took time getting used to....I sort of was able to understand, I guess, most of what was said. Then speaking was an issue. Well, I still don't feel comfortable speaking. It sort of depends on several things, but mostly I'm fine now, but it took me longer. It took me some months to be able to be comfortable speaking and explaining things... also as a student we have this seminar where I have to speak sometimes and that was very hard at first, actually speaking in public in a language which is not mine....I didn't have that much difficulty with writing...and reading was also an issue, I guess because even back home (pause) at some point things get too technical and there is not a lot of books on your own language.

A PhD student from Turkey said:

Well, actually since English is my second language, that always creates a barrier. I mean, I felt that more in my first year....I kind of lost that spontaneity that you sometimes need for every day kind of communication, right....and not having that spontaneity was a barrier and I also felt this in some of the classes, you know like where there was casual conversation among students. Sometimes I was less participating. I was participating

less compared to other students but I think that kind of changed over the years but still sometimes I feel that, you know, like sometimes you don't remember every word.

A PhD student from Bangladesh commented about the language barrier: "Yeah, like as an international student, you know, when I came from my country, like speaking, yeah, is still a barrier. Like I'm feeling that way because vocabulary things, I can't understand what people say....but I want to express myself and it not the perfect word. I face it a lot."

In relation to contact time, students and lecturers often have different expectations of their respective roles and responsibility for student learning. For the supervisory or classroom instructor of an international graduate student, it is time consuming to correct poorly written drafts of work. Finding faculty members to supervise graduate work that may require more time on the part of a supervisor sent some students I interviewed to find other sympathetic faculty members within their department to provide guidance in their research and writing endeavours. Finding others to work with them was not always an easy task. In some departments, problems faced in working with faculty advisors may result in loss of time for the student in completing their program and hinder their efforts to be successful. International students often find it difficult to approach their supervisor and therefore supervisors may assume that they do not need assistance since they do not express the need.

In 2008, The Graduate Student Association (GSA) at York, as part of its equity audit, used an online questionnaire to assess equity concerns among graduate students and contract faculty. The report states that 88% of the 472 who completed some portion of the questionnaire and the 165 who completed the full questionnaire were graduate students. The most common ethnic group identified was 71% White, followed by 6% South Asian, 4% East Asian, and 3% Black. The remaining participants were West Asian, Latin American and Aboriginal. However, there is no indication which respondents were international students. Responses to open and closed ended questions revealed a few trends that paralleled what I heard from some of the international students I interviewed. The report cites "With regards to faculty, the most common challenge was an inadequate supervisor or finding an adequate supervisor (32 %). Related issues that were commonly cited were unavailability of faculty (28 %) and slow response times by faculty (16 %) that delayed their academic progress." (York University GSA, 2008, p. 11)

In relation to supervising graduate students, the March 2013 York *Teaching Commons Newsletter* includes a notice about a course called Supervising Graduate Students @ York. Aimed at graduate supervisors at the Masters and Doctoral level, it covers both practical matters such as University expectations as well as pedagogical issues concerning best practice in supervision. The TC has arranged for the course to be externally accredited by SEDA (Staff and Educational Developers Association) which is a professional association that promotes innovation and good practice in higher education. Course details are at <http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/supervising-graduate-students-york/> .

In the research on academic adjustment of international students, it is acknowledged that many international students do not engage in critical thinking and evaluation. Several researchers point out that Southeast Asian students in particular are sometimes uncomfortable engaging in critical exchange and contradiction because they do not consider it appropriate to place instructors and academic texts under critical scrutiny. (Brown, 2007)

A Masters student from China commented to me that:

Well, I think it still depends on the professor. You know, some people take this seriously, and they might check that or I will, but I think the chance of the professor checking that is much lower in China or (pause) well, actually, to be honest, in China we don't have assignments at all, so I would say 95 percent of the course, they only have a 100 percent final exam... Well, you know, some professor want you to always propose something new, you know; and when you take a course they ask you to give them some new ideas, and where we don't really need to do that, but they ask you to give ideas always, but.... Yeah, so we had (pause) we just (pause) it was about like how to associate different things together, so they will become a new combination of something. That is something new, you know, but it was only about two or three weeks work, so it wasn't very big.

In North American academic culture, students are expected to develop their own opinions and ideas. Independence of mind, creativity, and originality are prized as academic values. It often takes international students many months before they assimilate the required norms to engage with the literature they read, sometimes resulting in poorer grades when assessed on the criterion of critical evaluation. For some the adjustment is never made. (Brown, 2007)

The failure to engage critically applies not only to written work but also to the tutorial situation. Deference to the faculty member may inhibit debate and discussion. In reference to giving presentations, one Masters student from Mexico I interviewed commented:

Every class I have done a presentation which in Mexico is really rare; and, yeah, well, personally they're difficult for me because I'm not such an outspoken person so I get really red, but I see they are interesting because they do make you (pause) in one of them we had to choose between two of the readings and we had to compare them and it was really interesting to see how your mind kind of starts to really work at its full, and in another class we had to (pause) we had a concept and we have to find for ourselves the examples to talk about that, and also it kind of pushes you to go beyond that and just listen to the teacher....

For many students, this is a demand that is overwhelming, as expression of opinion may not be their cultural norm. One professor that I interviewed related a situation in which the international graduate student in the course quoted back to the professor uncredited excerpts from the faculty member's own writings thinking this would be respectful as well as desirable in improving the content of the paper.

My findings after interviewing graduate students from a variety of programs parallels the research which found that, despite the challenges of language and the differences in educational experiences, the international students interviewed seemed to have adapted over time to the changed context. (Jones, 2005) To make this transition easier, it is key that they be given appropriate guidelines so that they can understand the requirements of the assignment and the context in order to reach a successful outcome. If faculty try to communicate important messages that are completely misunderstood because of the students' own context or culture,

students lose the chance to do well. Articulating academic requirements and methods we may take for granted while providing the students the time to absorb them and the support they need can improve results. (Hills and Thoms, 2005)

A Masters student from Mexico had this experience:

Yeah, I actually have quite different experience. My first term I had a really amazing teacher and she helped us (pause) she really gave us a syllabus that had everything. She really explained what she wanted, and whenever you have a question you can raise it, and it was not a problem, and she knew how to explain herself. In this term I've been having problems with one of my teachers who I'm still not sure what she wants, so I'm writing my paper in the way I think she wants it, but I'm not so sure, and the problem is a lot of the students have asked her already, and every time she explains we still don't quite get it, so it's been a really different experience.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism

An area of interest to me is the level of understanding that international graduate students have about academic integrity and plagiarism requirements in a Canadian institution. The York Senate Academic Standards, Curriculum and Pedagogy (ASCP) provides a [Student Information Sheet](#) that includes [York's Academic Honesty Policy](#) and Procedures and a link to the University's [Academic Integrity Web site](#).

This information is to be attached to each course outline provided to students. Faculty are supposed to draw these resources to the class' attention at the beginning of the term and emphasize the importance of academic honesty standards to the integrity of the student's degree. However, my experience as a teacher in undergraduate library research sessions over many years as well as the testimony of the graduate students I interviewed for this project combine to substantiate my view that many instructors at York do not carry out that responsibility.

Several Faculties have dedicated web pages that highlight academic integrity practices. Here are some examples. The Faculty of Graduate Studies page is at http://www.yorku.ca/grads/policies_procedures/academic_honesty.html. The Faculty of Health link is at <http://health.info.yorku.ca/current-student-information/academic-honesty/> including a link to an excellent YouTube video on academic honesty pointing out the importance of academic integrity, common pitfalls, and services on campus to turn to for advice. Osgoode Hall Law School has an Academic Success Program at <http://www.osgoode.yorku.ca/programs/jd-program/academic-success-wellness/program> with information on a workshop on *Legal Citations and Academic integrity* presented by the Law librarians. The Schulich School of Business offers an Academic Honesty page on its website at http://www.schulich.yorku.ca/client/schulich/schulich_lp4w_lnd_webstation.nsf/page/Academic+Honesty?OpenDocument. That page provides guidance on these topics: Pressure to meet deadlines; Intent; Paraphrasing; Sharing work; Group work; and Citations. The site includes helpful links to the Libraries' Style Guides, Academic Writing Guides, and Citing Business Resources. There is also a link to its "Schulich School Implementation of the Senate Procedures for Dealing with Suspected Breaches of Academic Honesty".

One of my student interview questions explored the differences between the interviewees' experiences of academic culture in their country of origin and those of the new environment in Canada, particularly from the point of view of academic integrity issues.

Here is an interesting response from a Masters student from Mexico to that question:

Even in Mexico they always talk a lot about plagiarism, and I know it's important, but here I see that it's like really, really (pause) the consequences are really, really important and they take really (pause) pretty seriously, and also when presenting the papers, all these (pause) the importance of the bibliography, and like I was like MLA style, but it was like really laid back kind of doing the MLA, and now here I see that they prefer the APA, which means studying everything in a different way and thinking about your bibliography like – yeah, different concept.

A PhD student from Bangladesh answered the question this way:

Yes, definitely there is a huge difference, yeah, because I think that the quality or the style like we have been following in Canada is very different from where I have been from, and it's like the writing style you know in my country like when I was in my undergraduate I used to do lots of cut and copy, paste and these things. Maybe I was not so mature. I didn't think about it. I just want to get rid of it, you know, that's the thing....for the writing issue it's like it's definitely better than Bangladesh. Yes, it's definitely – the structure, the model. Like in Bangladesh I used to (pause) like the professor gives me a model. Sometimes I don't find the data and he says "Work on this" but here like I find it by myself. In the process I can learn many things.

A student from China interviewed for the *Writing Across Borders* film from Oregon State University says:

I noticed that citation is a very big part of academic papers here in the United States. People are very aware of the copyright issues, what the source is, where it is from, what picture is this magazine from and very detailedly cite everything. But in China it's not a big thing at all, I would just say for example an article I don't remember who said this, but this is roughly the sentence or just place a picture inside of my article without citing the source. And the more I think about it I think a big part of the reason is because the cultural differences because in China we are so used to sharing everything and we're a country with 45,000 years of Asian culture and also on top of that we are having communism the idea of that is everybody is supposed to be able to share everything so it's just very common and natural for people to think it is okay to share. (WAB Film Transcription)

This is what a PhD student from Turkey who I interviewed said about past experience with academic writing and using other people's ideas in assignments:

One thing I learned to do better as the years passed, how to you know, like summarize arguments and articles and use them in your work better. Like as an undergrad I remember I was, you know, like I was more inclined to get lost in some of the tasks, like

especially if they're too theoretical or if they are like in a subject that I wasn't familiar with, I used to get lost, right, and I wasn't in a very good position to summarize what was said in an article and how to re-articulate it in my own words but I learned....and, like you reach another level, I guess where you're supposed to know a lot that's done in your field where you're supposed to, you know, like summarize their arguments very briefly and what issues they are touching on, again, very briefly. Yeah, you know, like I think that it's a continuous development....

A PhD student from Bangladesh I interviewed acknowledged that English as a second language was also an academic barrier in relation to academic integrity issues:

It was painstaking work, yes, I do remember but honestly like when I can't express myself it's like 'Okay, so copy and paste', you know. Sometimes, yes, I do. Like I confess sometimes I do, especially in my masters courses, but in the PhD I know it will not going to work so.... like what I used to do I know that I have to change it because of my writing ability (pause) lack of my writing ability.... when I get some idea from others, I actually like copy them in my work, and then I rewrite by myself.

The problem becomes compounded when teaching assistants drawn from the graduate student cohort, including international graduate students, then become the instructor in the classroom and do not pass on the necessary information to set appropriate expectations for both written and oral assignments.

The recent March 2013 *Teaching Commons Newsletter* mentioned above lists all the programs mounted for graduate students as teaching assistants. The TC offers numerous courses, workshops, and certificate programs for Graduate Students in all levels of their teaching and professional development.

- Senior Teaching Assistant Program (SEDA Accredited)
- TA Certificate in Teaching (undergoing SEDA Accreditation)
- 'Record of Completion' Certificate
- Brown Bag Lunch Series/Professional Development Workshops

More information about these programs can be found at http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/ta_support/.

Best Practices

One of the goals of my research project was to identify academic issues facing international graduate students with the hope of pinpointing areas of improvement based on what I heard in my interviews, through background research, and what has been accomplished in other organizations.

In this section of the report, I will highlight some of the solutions and best practices to move forward in actively supporting international students in their quest for successful achievement and a good student experience while at York. From this point of view, I will address the areas of Departmental Communication with Graduate Students, International Education and Faculty Support, Academic Integrity and Plagiarism, and York University Resources for International Graduate Students.

Departmental Communication with Graduate Students

During my interviews with both students and faculty, it became clear that the degree of support and communication from York graduate programs varied from one department to another. There were several best practices identified that bear repeating as possible models for other graduate programs at York.

A PhD student from Turkey, aware the Libraries and Writing Centre's academic workshops, webinars, and subject research guides, related the means by which this communication was achieved:

This [library] workshop was sent through the [department] listserv... maybe in Graduate News, a newsletter sent every week, maybe there; and also our GPA – you know, like whatever she receives she sends on ... instructors would do that and also another program assistant she prepares a weekly digest. That is also sent to the list or like conference announcements....

The effectiveness of individual testimonials from international students coming from different countries and studying in different programs sharing their experiences can be seen in the *Writing Across Borders* film. This in conjunction with a peer-to-peer mentoring program could be very powerful in demystifying the educational process at York and may mitigate to some degree the unevenness of academic support delivered to students by graduate programs.

Another practice in place in some graduate departments but not in others is a “buddy system”. The same student from Turkey described one:

Recently the department started a buddy system. Like every incoming student is assigned a student buddy. [It's] at the graduate level and I think it helps incoming students. Like, for instance, I spoke with a candidate ...who got accepted and I, you know, like gave all the information I had. So, I mean, I didn't have this...I didn't know many things until maybe the half of my second year.

A Graduate Program Director related to me the practice of contacting newly accepted international graduate students prior to their arrival at York. They were reached by email, telephone or even SKYPE for a personal introduction and to set the stage for answering any questions and imparting information that will help ease the academic adjustment for the student once they are attending York. This type of outreach seems to be very beneficial in dealing with

some of the challenges and anxieties that international graduate students inevitably bring with them. Personal attention is one of the key tools that can be used to increase the certainty that the international student will have a successful academic experience at York.

Along the same lines as above, in discussing with a student the supervisor/student relationship, a PhD student from Mexico noted a beneficial situation not necessarily emulated in other graduate departments I heard about in my interviews. "I was supposed to work with him from the beginning so we met each other by email and then when I applied I already said that (pause) well, he had agreed to be my supervisor in case I got accepted." When asked about how often they met after starting the program at York, the student replied: " Mostly weekly, sometimes twice a week, depending on how much progress ...sometimes I really have to tell him something....Sometimes he's busy, but he tries to be available."

During interviews with faculty members, an idea was suggested that would benefit the adjustment of international graduate students dealing with academic concerns. Agendas of the Faculty of Graduate Studies meetings with Graduate Program Directors could include topics from time to time that specifically relate to international students to help ensure a forum for discussion and a consistency of approach across departmental lines. One topic could be how to educate international graduate students about academic honesty practices in a Canadian higher education environment. It would also be helpful if FGS encourages GPDs to actively make the academic support services available on campus well known to all international students enrolled in departmental programs. As recommended by faculty I interviewed, it is important to give the students the tools they need to succeed.

International Education and Instructor Support

The *Writing Across Borders* project at Oregon State serves as a good source of information for teaching faculty, first-year writing graduate teaching assistants, or other instructors facing international students in the classroom. There is special link on the website at <http://cwl.oregonstate.edu/using-film-faculty-development>. In using the film for instructor development, several excellent questions are raised to provoke discussion. They point to pedagogical strategies gleaned from teaching experience to improve instructors' interactions with international students.

These are the questions presented with links to discussion content.

Discussion Facilitation Questions

- In the film, international students provide a number of cultural differences they have noticed between writing in their home countries and the United States. How has culture played out in your own classrooms and with student writing? What experiences have you had?
- What kinds of cultural preferences do you think you have when it comes to writing? Where did those preferences come from?
- Jean Kaunda, the student from Malawi, talked about her fears of writing about politics. What kinds of issues does that raise for you in your classrooms? How might you deal with that issue with your international students?
- What research-based issues have you noticed in international students' writing? How do you handle those issues?

- To what extent do you think we should accept cultural preferences even though the students are writing for American classrooms?
- How do you approach surface error in ESL student writing? Do you correct a lot, a little, none? What has worked or hasn't worked so well for you in the past?
- One of the ideas mentioned in the film is that many of the errors that non-native speakers make have nothing to do with learning grammar rules, but are instead matters of advanced memorization. How do you handle this issue when working with non-native speakers? What is fair?

Common Questions Asked by Faculty

- Won't the native speakers in the class complain if non-native speakers are given extra time or given special allowances?
- To what extent does culture influence how students write?
- Is it really part of our job as teachers to think about where international students are coming from and anticipate the difficulties they'll have?
- If international students are getting an American degree, shouldn't they learn to write like an American?
- What kinds of writing backgrounds do international students have when they come to the U.S.?

(WAB, Faculty Development)

The Higher Education Academy (HEA), a British organization funded by four UK higher education bodies, is a prime example of an important source of information on international education championing excellence in teaching and learning. The website at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/> has a focus on international education with a section entitled Teaching International Students at <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/teaching-international-students>. The objective is to assist teaching staff to improve the quality of teaching to international students by providing guidance on how to meet diverse learning needs.

One important resource connected to this project is the International Student Lifecycle Resources bank (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/international-student-lifecycle>.) Under a section called Teaching and Learning in the Classroom, additional information under the headings Teaching Context, Teaching Approaches, Learning, Curriculum, and Intercultural Competencies are provided.

The Learning links are invaluable in addressing the concerns international graduate students have in succeeding in academic programs in countries other than those in which they were educated. There are advice and resources covering the vital subjects of critical thinking, academic writing, addressing plagiarism, independent learning, language and reading and note taking.

Instructor Expectations

In the classroom, a best practice worth following is to ensure that teachers state their expectations clearly and unequivocally. Two main areas that came up in the literature and in my interviews are building on the students' understanding of critical appraisal and clarifying the assignments at hand. In regard to the former, it is advised that the instructor explain what critical appraisal means in the course context and why it is important. Guidance might include a

discussion of comparing and contrasting theory, developing reading skills, using resources available on key skills website such as the Libraries or Learning Commons, listening skills etc. For guidance on assignments, it would be helpful if a description of the task was accompanied by brief advice as to expectations, an explanation of key terms, instructions on how to evaluate materials, writing tips such as an outline strategy, and recommendations on how to utilize related readings. (Hills and Thoms, 2005)

Speaking of faculty expectations for an assignment, a Masters student from Mexico I interviewed said:

...it's not that easy because every teacher is different, but how the professors react towards what (pause) I mean, of course, they have high expectation of us, but what I was saying – like we do hope that they explain what exactly they are expecting in order for us to (pause) I mean, we also have high expectation of us so we're always trying to do our best, but it's always nice to have a teacher that is always rooting for you and pushing you to do your best, and I (pause) of course, I know that's difficult because every teacher has their own way of teaching....

When asked to describe impressions of the first classes at York, a PhD student from Turkey related a useful approach to acclimating students to the content and expectations of a York course:

I really liked that the course directors were really open to any kind of discussion, any kind of input from the students, and in one of the classes we went through the syllabus in the first week and we all, you know, like made suggestions as to how to, you know, like maybe had some other readings or (pause) which we need to focus on, and also how to shape the class discussions and things like that....Like, that was the first week . It was called Week Zero. There was this introduction for students. Then in the second week it was called Week One. It was an introduction to the course and it was a full-year course and I think it helped us to work up before the course.

This student made additional comments describing positive experiences:

[The faculty member] was doing an introduction to the areas we are going to cover, that was helping to contextualize the week's readings, you know, like in the general discussion...and then we had a presentation, and then we had a class discussion, and it always went smoothly, and every time all the students had a chance to speak, contribute to the class discussion, and it was really good.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism

There were some helpful recommendations in the literature about how to approach academic integrity and plagiarism issues particularly with international students as the focus but of course any steps to clarify these concepts will also benefit all students at York. A useful strategy would be to devote the necessary time for the international support people on campus to talk about

these concepts and expectations of students at events such as orientation sessions. This was not formerly done at the York International orientation event I intended in 2011 although a student from Mexico mentioned plagiarism in passing, without defining it, commenting that “You can be kicked out of school if you are caught”.

This remark leads to another recommended strategy. Teachers should be emphasizing the reasons why students should follow these academic practices such as grounding the students’ approach in research that supports student learning, providing evidence of their reading and research, allowing the reader to delve further into relevant sources on the topic by tracing back to resources used in the assignment, and actively avoiding a charge of academic dishonesty. (Hills & Thoms, 2005) These discussions should be paired with information on why plagiarism is wrong, what the penalties are at York, and how to avoid them. Yet an additional prong to this information program would be for librarians to include academic integrity guidance and citation style instruction in their library research sessions in the classroom and via printed and online instruction assistance in the form of handouts or web sessions widely accessible to students.

It is essential that, wherever and however the message is delivered throughout the University, all are saying the same thing. Instructors and librarians should talk about plagiarism and related issues such as referencing and citations in repeated teachable moments especially when assignments are addressed. Consistency helps the students internalize the concepts and practices and greatly increase their knowledge and comfort level with academic integrity values and practices. The Hills and Thoms research with Masters level students made the point that if academic staff fail to be clear about expectations and do not devote enough time for students to absorb information, they may be setting the students up for failure. (Hills & Thoms, 2005)

There are tools at York that could be presented to students in orientation sessions and at the beginning of all new courses. The York *Senate Policy on Academic Honesty* was updated in February 2011 (<http://www.yorku.ca/secretariat/policies/document.php?document=69>). It includes policy, guidelines and procedures that govern breaches of academic honesty. For several years, York had an active Academic Integrity Working Group composed of faculty, administrators, and librarians. A major outcome of their work was the revision in 2009 of the *Academic Integrity Tutorial* at http://www.yorku.ca/tutorial/academic_integrity/index.html which was originally mounted in 2004. The tutorial is applicable to all subject and research areas and any level of study. Many faculty members require their students to take the quiz at the conclusion of the Tutorial and print out the notification of successful completion so that they know each student has had basic instruction in academic integrity and has to some degree absorbed what they have learned. This practice should be encouraged at the departmental level.

When asked what recommendations can be made to make international graduate students more comfortable with the academic environment at York, a Masters student from Mexico I interviewed echoed what I heard from several others:

Well, I think like what you were mentioning about how the teachers are supposed to present this academic integrity before like in the class, that’s important because I didn’t get that; and I feel like... well, there’s international graduate students that already good at writing in English because they have had the experience, but some sort of academic

writing courses that were some sort of mandatory... or workshops that could help on the writing, I guess; and I see that mostly of... most of my colleagues... classmates/colleagues are... maybe not international, but most of them are not Canadian, that's for sure.

Plagiarism

On the British Higher Education Academy (HEA) website mentioned earlier, for the topic of plagiarism, the breadth and depth of the content is impressive and recognizes the complexity of this issue when related to international students. The section at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/internationalisation/ISL_Plagiarism focuses on how institutions and teachers can teach international students about how to avoid plagiarism, ensure the students develop the necessary skills to avoid it, and deal fairly with cases amongst international students when they do occur. The topics covered are: the levels of plagiarism, differences in expectations, language issues, ease of access to information on the internet, and fear of accusations of plagiarism. Then guidance is given on possible solutions and suggestions for action for individual teachers, at the program level and on the institutional level. A bibliography, suggested readings and case studies are provided.

Yet another tool provided by the HEA is their Academic Integrity Service <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/academic-integrity> :

The Academic Integrity Service has been established to raise awareness and enhance understanding of the issues relating to academic integrity in higher education. The Service promotes a holistic approach to academic misconduct, which considers the pedagogical and management responses needed to address issues, such as plagiarism, collusion and cheating.

We are working to support the higher education community by:

- providing guidance on developing policies and procedures relating to academic integrity;
- highlighting resources that enable lecturers to focus on teaching and learning strategies that can help deter student plagiarism;
- encouraging the sharing of best practice in the area of academic integrity;
- running and contributing to events that are for educational developers, lecturers and senior managers.

Another excellent resource for plagiarism support is Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL) providing online guidance available at any time from any place. It can be found at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/589/03/>. The philosophy of the site matches the approach I advocated earlier in this report on how to present academic integrity issues clearly and in a positive manner. This quote is from the section called Safe Practices.

Most students, of course, don't intend to plagiarize. In fact, most realize that citing sources actually builds their credibility for an audience and even helps writers to better grasp information relevant to a topic or course of study. Mistakes in citation and crediting can still happen, so here are certain practices that can help you not only avoid plagiarism, but even improve the efficiency and organization of your research and writing. (Stolley, Brizee and Paiz, 2013)

The information provided is detailed and authoritative. It includes exercises for students and best practices for teachers.

York University Resources for International Graduate Students

A PhD student from Turkey felt that the academic support services on campus that could assist students with their academic adjustment to York are not well-publicized:

...There are really good sources at the university but there's not always enough information to the students about these sources...I mean, this kind of information should be more widely disseminated to all sorts of students like undergraduates, graduates, international, domestic I think.

York International

Although there are several administrative units on campus that provide information for international students, there are not many that focus on graduate students. Of course, the main focus for international students on campus is York International at <http://international.yorku.ca/>. It is the central office with the mandate to facilitate international education activity and further the University's internationalization goals. However, it provides students support for non-academic services. Under the Current Students link on the York International website there is information about orientation, housing, immigration, taxes, health insurance, employment and York's Buddy Program, which matches up new students with more experienced ones. There is no section devoted to academic issues particularly relevant to international students except for the link to the *International Teaching Assistant Handbook* at <http://international.yorku.ca/intlstud/new/ita.pdf> which is geared to graduate students. It provides excellent information relevant to the new academic culture that international graduate students, whether they are TAs or not, should know about and I believe the Handbook should be recommend as a key resource for all graduate students coming from other academic environments. The aim is to introduce students to their new academic home at York University.

Faculty of Graduate Studies

Another major player in providing support for international graduate students is the Faculty of Graduate Studies at <http://www.yorku.ca/grads/>. On the website there is no link specifically for international graduate students. A section that is useful to all graduate students but may have a particular relevance to international ones coming from different academic cultures, is the link to http://www.yorku.ca/grads/policies_procedures/academic_honesty.html, which is webpage on the Faculty of Graduate Studies website devoted to academic honesty issues covering the topics:

- What is "academic honesty": and why it is important?
- How to avoid academic dishonesty
- Whom to talk to about options and support
- What is the process if there is a suspected breach of academic honesty

On this page, FGS also provide links to the York University Libraries *Graduate Student Library Guide* at <http://www.library.yorku.ca/cms/graduate/> which covers such topics as citation guides, librarian research help, and research and writing guides. As well, there is a link to the Libraries *Guide for International Students* at <http://researchguides.library.yorku.ca/international> which is intended to help international and exchange students find information about resources and services available at the Libraries.

Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies

The Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies has a special website devoted to international students at <http://www.yorku.ca/laps/international/>. In addition there is a 2013 *International Student Orientation Handbook* http://www.yorku.ca/laps/international/pdf/International_Student_Handbook_2012.pdf

In this *Handbook*, international graduate students are referred to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for support on money matters, programs, resources, events etc. For administrative matters they are directed to Graduate Program Assistant assigned to each Masters or Doctoral program. For academic honesty, the *Handbook* stresses the importance of understanding academic integrity practices as being critical to academic success. The student is directed to the University policies as well as the Academic integrity website.

The Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies sets a good example in providing academic support services that may prove very useful to international students. The Office for Student Engagement, which is part of the Centre for Student Success, is very attuned to the needs of international students in relation to language, pedagogy, and stress among other issues, recognizing the necessity to even the playing field for them by offering workshops and assistance to help with the transition to academic life at York. Often these are mounted with the collaboration of other units on campus including the Libraries.

In addition there are other services at LAP&S useful to international students that welcome both undergraduate and graduate students. The Writing Centre and The English as a Second Language Open Learning Centre are both under the auspices of LAP &S.

The ESL Open Learning Centre www.yorku.ca/eslolc/keele/default.asp welcomes both undergraduate and graduate students to utilize the service for listening, reading, writing and speaking in English in a University setting. Services available include tutoring, workshops, and drop-in assistance. An annual initiative is a Graduate Student Survey that provides valuable information in assessing the needs of students and providing information to improve services. The main concerns covered in the questionnaire are Academic Listening/Speaking; Academic Writing/Reading; Cultural; and Professional. The detailed survey can be found at <http://www.yorku.ca/laps/eslolc/survey/>.

The Writing Centre at <http://www.yorku.ca/laps/writ/> , mentioned earlier in this report by students I interviewed, offers essay tutoring services, including the Transition Open Workshop Series that integrates instruction on academic writing, research, and learning skills which covers a workshop on how to avoid plagiarism.

A PhD student from Mexico indicated during my interview that he was aware of the services of the Writing Centre but had not taken advantage of them. When asked how the student knew about the Centre, the response was:

I think it was because I attended some (pause) well, they also do this information session at York International for new international students and I probably gave my email address there so that they have this list and they send announcements and stuff. I think that's how I became aware of this because I also got emails for their events and stuff.

A PhD student from Turkey not only knew about the services of the Writing Centre but as a TA recommends the Centre to tutorial students:

...I tell my students that they may need to go to the Writing Centre... I remember it was very early on when I came across the workshops, or whatever they are called...and I told my students that like, you know, almost all classes that I (pause) there was a paper assignment, right, so I told them that they may want to go to the Writing Centre if they are not feeling very secure about their writing...I think this is an issue especially for undergraduates, the first year.

The student went on to make a recommendation:

Like I think maybe it should be part of their programs. Like maybe they should have a course on this...I think it is really an important issue and it's not really addressed well and then you tell your students that they can go to the Writing Centre whenever they need, they take offense for most of the time because they think that the Writing Centre is only for English as a second language people, and I think it should be advertised more widely, and maybe the Writing Centre should come to classes.

York University English Language Institute (YUELI)

York University English Language Institute's mission is to provide high quality programs for those who wish to improve their English for academic and professional purposes. Completion of YUELI's academic program meet the entrance requirements for many undergraduate and graduate programs at York. The YUELI website is at <http://www.yueli.yorku.ca>.

Teaching Commons

The Teaching Commons (formerly the Centre for the Support of Teaching) is at <http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/>. Its work focuses on support for the professional development of teaching and learning and encourages teaching innovations. The Teaching Commons has services and resources to support the teaching work of graduate students at all levels. A component of that program is designed to provide as much support as possible for teaching assistants, many of whom are international graduate students. The TC provide several

professional development programs for teaching assistants which are attended by international TAs that help build skills and provide certification as instructors. They can be found at the TC website under [TA Support](#) at http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/ta_support/ covering the following topics:

- Teaching Assistant (TA) Orientation
- Teaching Assistant (TA) Events & Workshops
- Senior Teaching Assistant (STA) Program
- Teaching Commons Tutor (TCT) Program
- Teaching Assistant Certificate in Teaching (TACT)
- 'Record of Completion' Certificate
- Resources for Teaching Assistants

Relevant to this report, the TC provides web pages and workshops that offer materials and guidance to faculty and teaching assistance to build up their knowledge and best practice in support of their students' understanding of academic integrity issues. The Teaching Commons website at <http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/resources/academic-integrity/faculty/> offers links with suggestions on how to promote academic integrity, both generally and in particular classroom situations.

Since many international graduate students serve as teaching assistants, the Teaching Commons stress on academic integrity training for TAs is especially useful in helping to increase these students' individual understanding of academic integrity issues. In addition, these resources provide guidance also on how they should reinforce these standards with the students in their own classroom. There is a section on the Teaching Commons website under the title *Academic Integrity for TAs, Tutorial Leaders and Demonstrators* at <http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/resources/academic-integrity/academic-integrity-for-tas/> which states:

TAs play an important role in helping students understand acceptable academic practices and develop effective research and writing skills. Further, through their roles as tutors, markers and invigilators, TAs are often in the best position to identify suspected plagiarism and other cheating behaviours. In this section are links to resources and strategies for TAs to help promote academic integrity.

The Teaching Commons webpages called *An Overview of Academic Integrity at York University* is a gold mine of information and advice for instructors and students about academic integrity.

Libraries

The York University Libraries are a core academic resource for all students including international graduate students. Information services, on campus and on the Internet, enhance student learning and advance research with librarians providing specialized consultation to researchers and graduate students.

When asked if there are any suggestions or recommendations that a PhD student from Mexico could make that would increase the comfort level with academic work, this recommendation was made:

I think you do this every year at the library where... I don't exactly remember the name, but at the beginning of the year you [the library] do something with an information session for students and I haven't been able to attend with last year or this year and I would have liked to sort of but I just couldn't.

York's librarians offer workshops on their own initiative or by request from individual faculty members and administrators. In addition to the extensive information literacy program that brings librarians into the classroom, they work with instructors, departments, and Schools to collaboratively develop academic literacy components for courses and programs.

As examples of activities undertaken by requests by individuals and units, librarians have developed and facilitated workshops that contribute to the successes of the LAP&S' Office for Student Success as well as the Teaching Commons TA Day. In relation to academic integrity issues, several York librarians have designed workshops directed to students such as "Avoiding Plagiarism and Understanding York's Academic Honesty Policy", and "Citing and Referencing Workshop" and one directed at TAs and faculty called "Prevent Plagiarism Before It Happens! Tools You Can Use to Promote Academic Integrity".

Broader based services designed to support students from all across the campus include the extensive online collection of *Subject Research Guides* and *Academic Writing Guides* available via the York Libraries homepage at <http://researchguides.library.yorku.ca/content.php?pid=220564>. Research guides specifically developed to highlight academic integrity and citation techniques can be found on the Libraries website. There is an informative section entitled *Footnotes and Bibliography* at <http://researchguides.library.yorku.ca/styleguides?hs=a&gid=1377> stressing the importance of proper citation for all scholarly work. Tabs with links on how to use various style guides provide detailed information about how to use a particular citation style for various media formats. In my interviews with international graduate students, they mentioned several different style guides that were appropriate for their different disciplines. The Libraries section on Footnotes and Bibliography provides links to APA, MLA, Chicago, Harvard and other styles.

Other valuable resources that are introduced to students through this website are web-based bibliographic management tools for citation management that allows students to automatically create a database of citations or references to resources (books, journal articles, web sites, etc.). There are two such products described: RefWorks for which the York Libraries has purchased a site license for members of the community to use at no cost which facilitates the insertion of citations within a research paper as in-text references, footnotes, or endnotes, and the creation of a formatted bibliography using a citation style of choice. All major citation styles are supported. A comprehensive guide to RefWorks can be found at <http://www.library.yorku.ca/cms/citation-management/refworks/>.

Another citation management software covered in detail is Zotero which is a free, downloadable web tool to help collect, organize, cite, and share research sources. There is a guide prepared by the librarians linked at the Footnotes and Bibliography page at <http://researchguides.library.yorku.ca/zotero>. An online workshop was designed and facilitated by York librarians that was recorded. The 45 minute webinar can be listened to at any time and from any place at <http://connect.yorku.ca/p17353512/>.

A major York Libraries initiative that has been put in place in the Scott Library, with plans to expand the concept to other York Libraries, is the Learning Commons@Scott. The Learning Commons at <http://www.library.yorku.ca/cms/learning-commons/> is a cooperative endeavour incorporating a physical space with innovative services bringing together writing, research, learning skills and career services provided by the Libraries, The Writing Centre, and Learning Skills Services (CDS). This is a very significant development in collaborative activities at York as well as an important focus of research and study for York's students. This concept will be expanded when the Virtual Learning Commons project supported by the Academic Initiative Fund entitled Student Papers and Academic Research Kit (SPARK): Virtual Learning Commons Project is completed.

Recommendations

Student Papers and Academic Research Kit (SPARK): Virtual Learning Commons Project

SPARK is a pan-university eLearning resource intended for all York students. It is the outcome of an Academic Innovation Fund three-year project initiated by the Libraries. It consists of a collection of audio, visual and interactive learning modules that may be used independently or can be embedded within course materials. The online learning modules address a variety of topics related to academic literacies; research, writing and learning skills. Under the Library section of this report I provided information on the Learning Commons space in the Scott Library. The SPARK project will extend the academic support available in the physical Learning Commons to an online environment. These online learning modules will support students' development of these key skills across the curriculum and will provide students with round-the-clock accessibility.

I recommend a University-wide promotion and utilization of the completed SPARK project as an excellent tool to provide students, including international students, with the valuable and pedagogically sound information they need to help them build their academic literacy skill sets to succeed in a university setting.

An article entitled "SPARK, the Virtual Learning Commons, An Online Resource for Academic Literacy at York University", found at the Contact North Ontario Online Learning Portal for Faculty and Instructors at <http://www.contactnorth.ca/pockets-innovation/spark-virtual-learning-commons>, describes SPARK:

To create an online resource to support students as they complete written research assignments, three units at York University in Toronto – the Libraries, Learning Skills Services, and the Writing Department – came together to create the Virtual Learning Commons. The project called SPARK – Student Papers and Academic Research Kit – is now underway with launch scheduled for September 2013.

This online resource will encompass research, writing, and learning skills directed to the needs of undergraduate students from across a range of disciplines, including direct entry, mature, and international students. Faculty are the secondary user group, with a module designed to assist them in integrating academic literacies into their courses. The needs of each group were assessed during an extensive needs assessment process and they continue to inform the development of SPARK.

There are thirteen modules that have been developed under three broad headings:

- Getting Started
 - Understanding the Assignment
 - Time Management
 - Academic Integrity
 - Choosing a Topic
 - Books, Journals & More

- Exploring
 - Gathering and Noting Ideas
 - Research Strategies
 - Effective Reading Strategies
 - Essay Structure
- Pulling It Together
 - Creating Bibliographies
 - Writing Strategies
 - Revising your Arguments
 - Essay Editing

(Spark, 2013, p.2)

In my discussions with Sarah Coysh, York Libraries E-Learning Librarian and Co-Chair of the SPARK project, she pointed out that the modules were designed using academic language, thereby being appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate students, the latter in their project and thesis preparation. In the preliminary focus group activities that took place before the design of each module was decided upon, students were asked for feedback. One focus group was comprised of international students. They were asked if they wanted resources in languages other than English. Their response was that was not necessary but what would be most helpful would be information in the modules that pointed out the differences in academic writing in North America and around the world.

Twelve modules are set to be launched in September 2013 with the thirteenth, the one on Academic Integrity, to be in place by January 2014. The developers intend three applications for the virtual learning modules:

- Students can work through each one on their own initiative;
- Students can be directed through the site with the guidance of the staff in the Libraries, the Learning Skills Services or the Writing Department; or
- Faculty can give assignments that integrate the use of individual or multiple SPARK modules.

At a future date a separate module will be developed that helps faculty integrate academic literacies into their courses.

SPARK will benefit from greater communications and promotion of library services and resources to faculty and students. The more widely that SPARK is publicized and linked to various websites of academic support units, Faculties, and instructors, the greater an impact the project will have on both undergraduates and graduate students. SPARK has significant potential as a tool to ease the way for international students to overcome the challenges they face in research and writing in a new academic culture, including academic integrity concerns.

Coordinated International Graduate Student Information and Services

At York, support for international graduate students is fragmented with some units focusing on non-academic issues and with others dealing with academic ones. Within disciplines and graduate programs, different degrees of concern for the needs of these students are demonstrated. For internationalization efforts to succeed, a broad network of support services for international students helping with cultural adaptation is required.

A holistic strategy is required. I recommend that the University explore developing a strong website with easy access to resource materials, including webinars, to aid international graduate students in facing the academic challenges they face at York. York International and the Faculty of Graduate Studies could jointly work with other relevant partners on campus to provide information and set up webpages geared to the academic needs of international graduate students. This would go a long way to overcome the splintered nature of academic support for international graduate students that was highlighted by several of the students, faculty and administrators I interviewed for this project.

Information for graduate students, including international ones, presents yet another opportunity for coordinated efforts by committed groups on campus to achieve a common goal. Coalitions of this type would be beneficial to improving academic services for York's graduate students in general and international graduate students in particular. A recent research report by Covert-Vail and Collard, sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in Washington of which the York Libraries is a member, highlights efforts made at two Ontario universities to develop a collaborative network throughout the institution to provide services to graduate students. The ARL document notes:

Examples of broad, cross-campus partnerships that incorporate the library are seen in several Canadian research universities. These are formalized, multi-pronged approaches to graduate student development that bring a range of players into the mix. The University of Western Ontario's 360° Graduate Student Professional Development Initiative at <http://www.grad.uwo.ca/360/> offers a diverse range of events, workshops and courses, which provide critical communication, writing, teaching and professional skills to graduate students and postdoctoral fellows.

The University of Guelph's Graduate Student Learning Initiative (GSLI) <http://gsli.uoguelph.ca/> brings together key campus services that support academic and professional skill development for graduate students. Both of these ambitious programs combine the expertise, skills, and staff of multiple campus entities, including the libraries, working together to expand and deliver the breadth of graduate education. (Covert-Vail & Collard, 2012, p.5-6)

Western's 360 programs are described on the University website at <http://www.grad.uwo.ca/360/>. The objective is to "provide graduate students with the knowledge, skills and mentoring they need to succeed at each stage of the graduate journey, from coursework through comprehensive exams, thesis writing and publishing to the academic and non-academic job search after graduation" and is the result of campus wide collaboration between the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, the Teaching Support Centre, Student Development Services, Western Libraries, the Career Centre, Communications and Public Affairs, the Faculties and many other colleagues across campus.

An important aspect of the Western program is a special focus on international and new Canadian graduate students with an International Grad Student Program with workshops and resources geared to learning about expectations in a Canadian academic setting. A description of this Program can be found at <http://www.grad.uwo.ca/360/international.cfm>.

Guelph's Graduate Student Learning Initiative (GSLI) works with partners from Career Services, Learning Services, the Data Resource Center, Writing Services, University Teaching Development Program (faculty support, TA training), the library and the Office of Research. Together, they offer sessions throughout the year to support academic and professional skills development. It is interesting to note that the GSLI started out as a smaller, successful collaboration between some GSLI units when a learning commons was created. (Covert-Vail & Collard, 2012)

Perhaps in time, and with the proper resources, York may build on the collaborative momentum already gained by establishing the Learning Commons@ Scott Library and the new SPARK online module initiative described earlier in this report. Efforts may evolve into a broader program with partners across the campus focusing on graduate students. Coordinated projects hold out great promise in meeting the University goal of improved student experience, in this case for graduate students including international ones.

The Council of Ontario Universities states on the academic integrity portion on its website that Ontario's universities are committed to ensuring academic integrity in teaching, learning and research, "protecting the credibility of your degree and institution." The COU website at <http://cou.on.ca/about/ontario-universities/academic-integrity> is dedicated to sharing Ontario Universities' best practices to enhance academic integrity among all those on our campuses.

The York Teaching Commons at <http://teachingcommons.yorku.ca/resources/academic-integrity/faculty/> expands on this COU commitment in the section on *An Overview of Academic Integrity* that reads:

Academic Integrity is the cornerstone of the academic enterprise. Without high standards of academic integrity the value and credibility of a York Degree would be diminished and with it the reputation of the institute as a foremost centre of research and higher learning. It is therefore incumbent upon the university to provide an environment that is conducive to promoting and ensuring that the highest standards of integrity and honesty in intellectual pursuits are being met.

It was evident from the interviews I conducted and the research I did about resources at York that academic integrity responsibilities are splintered across campus. As an example, the University administration has turned over responsibility for the student support sections of the Academic Integrity website to the Libraries while the focus on AI for faculty, instructors and TAs lies with the Teaching Commons. Administrative procedures relating to academic honesty infractions, appeals and penalties rest within different Faculties, departments, the Senate and Secretariat, all of which have faculty committees and administrative personnel responsible for dealing with complaints and appeals of academic misconduct incidents. The educational function as represented by workshops and learning resources is scattered between the Libraries, The Writing Centre, the Teaching Commons, Counselling and Disabilities Services, and units such as the Office for Student Engagement at LA&PS. From a student perspective, this multi-pronged approach makes it difficult to find and absorb academic integrity information and dilutes the sense of a University commitment to academic integrity as a core institutional value.

In May 2007, the Council of Ontario Universities sponsored a document by Neufeld and Dianda called *Academic Integrity: a Survey of Policies and Procedures at Ontario Universities* which can be found at <http://www.cou.on.ca/publications/academic-colleague-papers/pdfs/academic-dishonesty-a-survey-of-policies-and-proce>. The report states:

The primary goal of effective policies, and particularly of their definitional sections, should be to provide clear, unambiguous information to those governed by the policy so that they can avoid committing an offence. The secondary goal should be to enable institutions to proceed effectively against those who have nevertheless offended. (Neufeld and Dianda, 2007, p.5)

In relation to achieving these goals, the report goes on to say:

Universities are our society's principal institutions for cultivating and promoting a serious appreciation of the value and importance of academic honesty. It is important that, as much as possible, they speak with one voice regarding the seriousness with which instances of academic dishonesty are treated and penalized. (Neufeld and Dianda, 2007, p.13)

The focus of this statement is on a consistent approach among Ontario universities. I want to emphasize the importance of a consistent approach within a university. The students in the Alma Mater Society of Queens University prepared a response to the COU academic honesty report entitled *Promoting Integrity*. In it they say “Academic integrity policy should apply equally to all members of the academic community. Students, professors, and all academic members of a university community should be held to the same standard of integrity.” (Alma Mater, 2008, p.2). I believe it is essential that approaches, policies and procedures are consistent across all York’s Faculties and that there is confidence that similar offenses are dealt with and penalized in the same way.

At York, statistics about academic integrity cases have been reported via the Senate Appeals Committee on an annual basis to the University Secretariat since 2006. Also statistics were collected by the Academic Integrity Working Group. However, compliance with requests for this information across the campus is not always robust therefore undermining the accuracy and usefulness of the data. Different policies and different departmental cultures may provide different levels of reporting. The statistics present data on Senate and Faculty-level cases and look at these cases from a variety of variables: by type and by year; by Undergraduate and Graduate levels; by Faculty, academic year, nature of infraction, program and type of offence.

The COU *Academic Integrity* report comments that public reporting of statistics

can serve as a type of performance indicator for the institution, demonstrating the seriousness with which it treats instances of academic dishonesty among its students.... An individual institution can use the statistics generated over time to determine whether academic dishonesty is on the rise or waning and thus judge whether its policies and procedures for dealing with academic dishonesty are effective. (Neufeld and Dianda 2007, p.11)

Considering the interest in how well international students comply with academic integrity practices in York’s academic environment, perhaps collecting data indicating cases involving international students by program level, Faculty, and country of origin should be added to track the reality of this concern.

Therefore I recommend that the York administration consider setting up a clear centre of focus of responsibility for academic integrity issues to reinforce the University’s commitment to preserving academic integrity on campus. Just as when copyright issues became complex, the University responded by establishing a University-wide Copyright Officer, so too would the institution benefit from establishing an Academic Integrity Officer with pan-university responsibility, perhaps under the auspices of the Vice-President Academic and Provost. An Academic Integrity Officer could more effectively promote academic honesty at all levels and coordinate the various parts of the decentralized system presently in place at York. As noted above, many units and individuals currently contribute to AI efforts and could continue to do so cooperatively. Centralization under one umbrella organization is paramount not only for effective educational and administrative purposes but to prevent duplication of effort, promote information about AI using one voice, handle infractions consistently, and demonstrate the ongoing importance of this issue to the validity of York’s research, teaching and learning objectives.

As stated earlier in this report, any attempts to clarify academic integrity values and practices for the general York community will certainly also benefit the international students coming to York

with educational and cultural backgrounds that did not incorporate these values and practices as part of their earlier academic studies.

An example of an established Office of Academic Integrity is the one at the University of California at San Diego with a well-qualified staff dedicated to promoting and supporting a culture of academic integrity in order to reinforce quality teaching and learning. The website is at <http://students.ucsd.edu/academics/academic-integrity/index.html>. The Office provides consultation and education services for the community on AI issues, maintains an AI website, offers guidance on incorporating academic integrity into the curriculum, collects statistics on AI activities, writes an annual report to inform the community about AI efforts, and handles academic misconduct incidents. The UCSD Office is a member of the International Center for Academic Integrity (<http://www.academicintegrity.org/ica/home.php>) which has a worldwide membership of academic institutions who benefit from the ICAI's activities and resources. There are several Canadian members. In Ontario they are Brock University, Carleton University, Queens University, Ryerson University, Trent University, University of Toronto, University of Waterloo, University of Western Ontario, and University of Windsor.

Conclusion

I hope that the findings, best practices, and recommendations in this Report highlight the academic adjustment issues these students face and suggest some changes that can be made to implement appropriate support services. Improving the student experience while at York by removing academic success challenges faced by international graduate students, at a time when government and University policy is aiming to increase the number of these students on our campus, will provide the necessary guidance and structure to successfully fulfill educational goals and ensure that these students act as ambassadors for York as they return to their home countries.

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International Graduate Student Questionnaire

Interview Questions - Academic Success Challenges Faced by International Graduate Students, Toni Olshen

Graduate Students

Demographic Information

Code Name:

Gender: Age:

Home Country:

First Language:

Degree:

Department:

Faculty:

Years in York graduate program:

-
1. Please think back to your first days at York. Please describe your impressions of your first classes.
 2. As time went on, what academic issues, if any, caused you concern?
 3. Did your instructor provide you with his/her expectations or appropriate guidelines so you knew what was required in carrying out your academic work? Please elaborate.
 4. Let's look at different aspects of what was required of you. Please describe any barriers you experienced in reading, listening, speaking and writing.
 5. What were your most difficult tasks?
 6. Much academic writing involves reading background materials and other sources related to your topic. What issues, if any, have arisen about academic writing and textual borrowing?
 7. In writing academic papers, would you make a comparison between using material from other authors while writing an academic text in your previous educational experiences in your home country and those in Canada?
 8. What steps do you recommend to help provide an understanding and comfort level with academic integrity and plagiarism values and practices in academic writing?
 9. Before we conclude, is there anything of relevance that you would like to add?